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Student Motivation in Online Courses

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Abstract

Student achievement in online education shows no significant difference from traditional face-to-face learning (Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; Lewis, Whiteside, & Dikkers, 2014). With this as a backdrop, online education has been given a remarkable boost in consumer confidence, credibility, and growth (Lewis et al., 2014). Yet understanding student motivation in online education has shown this medium is still in its developmental infancy. Administrators are quickly making adjustments, as motivation factors heavily into student retention rates. Curriculum design, quality assignments, faculty communication, and student feedback all affect student engagement, satisfaction, and motivation. The online environment favors students who have basic technology capabilities, can manage time well, and desire independence. Administrators that support these features positively affect student success (Kranzow, 2013). This

chapter will look into successful pedagogical strategies for administrators, curriculum designers, and faculty for the online environment.

Overview

In today's changing labor markets, adults are finding it necessary to maintain currency and improve workplace skills. Often this means returning to the classroom as adult learners. However, much has changed in education over the years. Courses are now online and, generally speaking, adult learners who are new to the online environment are unaccustomed to this style of learning. Consequently, this affects the experience they have as they navigate today's online courses. In this environment students are expected to possess some basic technical skills, be adept at time management, and desire independence. These factors enhance a student's online success. Though these factors enable students to perform, students expect the environment to also function in a way that supports these success factors.

The educator's job is to create a learning environment that takes these factors into account. In this way, students function better and become adept learners. This translates into a motivating learner environment. Educators can create this motivating environment by designing quality courses. Thus, incorporating a supportive learner environment with these student success factors can have a positive impact in motivating the learner (Ilgaz & Gülbahar, 2015).

Knowing what motivates adult online learners serves to increase the quality of the learning process. Course design, instructor communication strategies, learner expectations, and student-centered independence all influence student motivation. Collectively, these factors contribute to adult self-efficacy, a critical component to online success and retention rates. Though adult learners take ownership of self-motivation, demotivation is perceived as a "teacher-owned problem" (Petty & Thomas, 2014, p. 475). Therefore, the way to retain adult learners is to create an environment that overcomes barriers to classroom participation. Wise (2003) created a formula that can be applied to today's online courses. The formula is "challenging tasks + good instructors + success + recognition = motivation" (Wise, 2003, p. 42). This formula offers a simple model to deliver the best in online adult education.

Review of the Literature

Learning in the online environment is different. Students are aware that they are in control of their environment, and they take responsibility for and invest in their own learning (Ilgaz & Gülbahar, 2015). For this scenario to manifest success, students need to come equipped with basic technical skills to overcome the demands of the learning management systems (LMS) used in online courses. But to increase the odds of success, administrators must ensure course design is aligned with the learning goals, and instructors should incorporate a positive presence in the course while responding to students quickly and effectively (Lewis et al., 2014).

Aside from the technological challenges learners may experience, it has been found that administrators, curriculum designers, and faculty are also struggling to adapt to changing technology (Ilgaz & Gülbahar, 2015). Key findings in the literature suggest that educators are presently comfortable delivering face-to-face instruction. The challenge is that in-class methods of instruction do not always translate well to online pedagogy. On the upside, researchers are helping to identify new supportive and adaptive mechanisms to engage and instruct today's online student (Alijani, Kwun, & Yu, 2014).

Lewis et al. (2014) found that adult students have a need to be in control, take responsibility for, and invest in their learning, but the classroom must also have student support mechanisms in place. Should these support mechanisms not be incorporated in the delivery of the course, student motivation may wane, leading to hurdles students may find difficult to overcome, leading to reduced retention. However, applying the model Wise (2003) derived, and using the ideas appropriately and consistently, can motivate students. These learner-centered approaches where "individual learner characteristics, preferences, motivations, and goals" are addressed can motivate students to achieve their desired educational outcomes (Cornelius, Gordon, & Ackland, 2011, p. 381).

The Student-Learner Perspective

The online learning environment is different for the adult learner. Students are faced with making their own schedules, working at their own pace, completing assignments within a flexible environment, and studying

independently. Though the tactical avenues to this style of education may sound appealing, students have found the single most challenging aspect of online learning is being responsible for completing their own work on time (Alijani et al., 2014; Plummer, 2012).

Consequently, best practices in online delivery contain assignments where students become reflective in their learning and connect the content to personal experience (Alijani et al., 2014; Roehl, Reddy, & Shannon, 2013; Quek Choon, 2010). These activities support active engagement and are learner centered. Though students have found reflective learning satisfying, this single approach to learning does not solve all the motivational challenges students face. Further studies in student social engagement may be necessary as a critical aspect to further student-centered learning.

Advancing Online Engagement

The Internet has advanced opportunities across the business landscape by bringing individuals, communities, and organizations closer together. Web 2.0 has further advanced this bridge by giving these same groups the ability to interact socially. Understanding this two-way social interaction and integrating the idea into an online pedagogical model can be quite different. Integrating these ideas into the online classroom has proved challenging as many instructors perceive the environment as a mechanism to deliver content in a unidirectional manner.

The challenges can be more difficult when trying to integrate social interactions in a virtual environment as there are significant differences in teaching practices between face-to-face instruction and the virtual classroom. To fully understand these differences, instructors may need a paradigm shift to understand their “roles, responsibilities, and instructional strategies” in the online classroom (Hawkins et al., 2012, p. 124). The upside is that instructors are experimenting with different integrative teaching approaches. One such approach that is gaining traction is where instructors are integrating blogs, wikis, journals, and video technologies as ways to integrate social interaction that can act as a virtual replacement for face-to-face instruction.

Within the online educational environment, Lewis et al. (2014) showed that by delivering a consistently engaging student-centered experience, students can be motivated. Engagement is key. Plummer (2012) stated

that quality and engaging content, along with instructional support, often delivers the highest student-centered success rates. This active-learning pedagogy delivers the necessary competencies students need today: critical thinking, self-reflection, creativity, communication, independence, and collaboration (Quek Choon, 2010). The active-learning pedagogy has been found to unlock gains in student performance by significant margins (Alijani et al., 2014; Prince, 2004).

Integrating a High-Quality Student Experience

Students with no previous experience in online education can often feel as if they are unable to master the required set of new rules. Much of this is the result of students missing the connection they had in the face-to-face classroom. Thus, course developers in the online environment will want to replicate, as much as possible, the face-to-face feel in an online classroom.

Students can develop a similar connection in the online environment, but it can take time to nurture. For students just starting out in online education, there are some helpful characteristics to be aware of, such as (1) have an open mind, (2) be capable of building self-efficacy, and (3) regulate learning. By knowing these outcomes, students can support higher levels of confidence and increase their morale, both of which can lead to higher academic accomplishment (Alijani et al., 2014; Moore, 2014).

Additionally, instructors who integrate a variety of active-learning pedagogic strategies can support this student-centered academic success. By keeping the educational environment simple and the learning flexible, the approach suits “learner characteristics, preferences, motivations and goals” (Cornelius et al., 2011, p. 381).

Taking these characteristics and incorporating them into the classroom supports a constructivist model where learners take responsibility for their own learning. For students, this creates a dynamic relationship between course assignments, personal knowledge, and experience. Learners take the discussion from concrete examples found in self-reflection and they begin to conceptualize deeper meaning by engaging with members of the learning community.

For some instructors, doing this may be unfamiliar to their teaching style. For them to engage online students successfully, it is advised they experiment with various instructional strategies until they find teaching

techniques that incorporate their own voice, deliver the course content in an engaging manner, and develop supportive relationships. Once instructors achieve this, the classroom has a comfortable, independent feel and supportive atmosphere—additional key factors that support student motivation (Moore, 2014).

Faculty who incorporate self-reflection assessments help the learning community develop critical thinking skills. By keeping the learning flexible and including resources that support the learning activities, students approach the content by exploring ideas within their personal and professional interest. The method encourages peer interaction, self-discovery, and motivation to further engage in their learning goals. To further student-centered learning and instruction, faculty can apply the community of inquiry as a natural integration to student-centered instruction.

Community of Inquiry

Furthering instructional success, one of the better-known models is the community of inquiry (CIO) framework as shown in Figure 1 (Hawkins et al., 2012; Johnston, Greer, & Smith, 2014). This framework incorporates three distinct student-centered constructs: “teacher presence, cognitive presence, and social presence” (Hawkins et al., 2012, p. 125). Combined, these three elements of instructional presence create a powerful online learning experience. This framework forms a distinctive student-centered engagement that develops active discussions, acknowledges and understands perspectives from others in the classroom, and challenges student assumptions (Johnston et al., 2014).

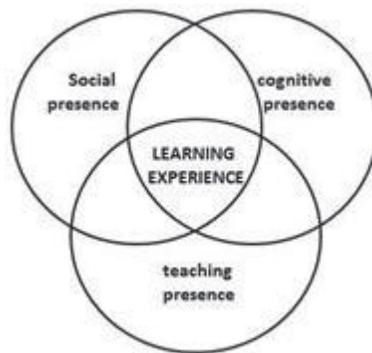


Figure 1. Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; Johnston, Greer, & Smith, 2014

By including all three elements of presence in the classroom, the intersection delivers a consistent online presence that builds self-efficacy through motivating pedagogic practices. The following descriptions help breakdown and define this success:

Teacher Presence. Instructor presence creates meaningful outcomes: curriculum design, active instructor facilitation, and integrating multiple pathways for both the cognitive and social aspects of the educational process. As students enter the depths of the course, instructors are engaged, present, active, and provide meaningful feedback (Hawkins et al., 2012).

Cognitive Presence. Cognitive presence engages students in the course content. By incorporating engaging assignments, students become enveloped into the reflective process where meaning takes shape based on experiences presented outside of the classroom (Hawkins et al., 2012).

Social Presence. Social presence links the student’s sense of community by seeing people as individuals with whom they can establish a sense of trust and connection through informal communication tactics such as humor and self-disclosure. This construct takes form in the online environment through engaged stimulation of student-to-student interaction through enhanced understanding of others’ thoughts, feelings, and motivations (Hawkins et al., 2012; Johnston et al., 2014).

Taken as a whole, community of inquiry supports an active-learning environment that focuses on student-centered learning. To achieve such an outcome, administrators will need to commit to supporting instructors through ongoing professional development (Alijani et al., 2014; Hawkins et al., 2012; Johnston et al., 2014).

Training, Feedback, and Support

Of the many roles the program administrator is tasked with, ensuring faculty are instructing courses in a manner congruent with the rules and policies of the institution, the school or department, and the program is a core function. Faculty work hard to improve their craft, to provide quality instruction, and to adapt to new standards. As online education continues to evolve at a rapid pace, faculty members look to the administrator to

provide these necessary tools, updates, feedback, instruction, and training to keep them current. Faculty who are competent in course instruction, have good technological capabilities, and are familiar with instructional tools in the LMS transfer a positive emotional component that is visible to student learners. Administrators are responsible for improving faculty teaching competencies, and by doing so will have more engaged faculty. Research has shown a positive correlation between faculty engagement and learner motivation (Ilgaz & Gülbahar, 2015).

Conclusion

Staying current in any industry falls within a continuum. In the educational industry, learning and adapting to new instructional pedagogy is a requirement to maintain and enhance one's career. This directly affects students in the classroom.

As the transition from face-to-face to online classrooms continues, developing effective online instructional pedagogy is becoming paramount to student success, the instructor, and the institution. Knowing and understanding the needs of the student entering an online program while also delivering effective instructional methodologies within the classroom becomes a formula for success. Simply stated, "Challenging tasks + good instructors + success + recognition = motivation" (Wise, 2003, p. 42).

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Author Biography

Greg Price is the Academic Program Director for the Master of Arts in Leadership and Human Resource Management programs at City University of Seattle. He is also an Associate Professor teaching courses in leadership and business. In private industry, he served as a director for a training organization in Tokyo, Japan, and as publisher and vice president for a regional publishing company. He earned a BA in economics from the University of Washington, an MBA from the University of Phoenix and is presently a doctoral candidate earning an EdD in leadership at City University of Seattle.